

Believe, Love, Hope by RossettiMucha

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Summary:

The Upside Down is always closer than you think.

Believe, Love, Hope

Joyce

Sometimes, Joyce felt as though she'd never returned from the Upside Down.

It was little things; things that would be barely discernible to someone who wasn't strung as tightly as Joyce, who hadn't just snatched their child back from the jaws of death.

She tried – so hard – to ignore it. She had her boy back; he was safe. If he laughed a little less, was quicker to tire than he used to be, then that was only to be expected, after what he'd been through. She didn't expect him to be the same Will Byers he had been before he disappeared from the woods; and though the unfairness of it all sometimes made her scream until the world went white and her ears rang for days, he was her son, still. He was home, and she was more grateful than she could possibly say.

The first snowfall of the year had shattered her sugar spun web of normalcy. The flakes seemed to fall from too far away, and when she, laughing, caught one on her tongue, she thought it tasted of ash. That peculiar silence particular to winter was different, too. It no longer covered Hawkins in a comforting blanket of seasonal inertia; instead it seemed to be a silence poised on a precipice, expectant and foreboding - the insidious silence of expectation.

She didn't want to ask Hopper if he had noticed it. She was afraid of his answer; afraid that it wasn't just her imagination, the strange quality of the light at dusk: how it wasn't always tinged with purple as it had been – before. How it sometimes looked almost greenish, and how, if she tilted her head just right, and looked out past the periphery of her vision, she thought she could see the walls move.

She was afraid for him, which was perhaps irrational. But she had Will, and Johnathan, and she would protect them with her dying breath. They had love, and family, and a home brightened by the consciousness of a rare and precious second chance. Hopper was alone, still, despite their rediscovered friendship. He seemed haunted

by something, though he would not tell her what; merely patted her hand, and gazed at her with softened eyes, and asked her, please, not to worry.

They were close these days - closer even, than they had been when they were on the right side of 25, when the world was fresh and new. It had occurred to Joyce, distantly, that perhaps she was more in love with him now than she had been then, though she had not thought about it enough for the notion to be anything more than a half-nurtured secret that swelled behind her breastbone when she looked at him. She did not think that she could help him. She could not save him from himself, or from the unthinkable darkness of the Upside Down, which she knew now, was always there, always pushing on the other side of the veil of reality. Waiting to steal Johnathan, or Will, or Hop. Her three boys.

It had not occurred to Joyce to be afraid for herself.

She had been so busy shepherding her sons in front of her, towards the sunnier world she so desperately wanted to create for them, that she did not think to look over her shoulder, to check that nothing was following through doors left unclosed. Not until she caught Will coughing up a lung in the bathroom, and realised that the Upside Down was not behind them, but within them, polluting their bright new future just as it had tainted their past.

As the Upside Down had been opened once before, by a little girl willing to rip the world apart in order to please her papa, so it was opened again by a young boy, tainted by its darkness but sustained by the incalculable power of a mother's love. This time, it emerged from the inside out, not the outside in. There was no flea on a tightrope, no hole to punch in the universe. Only Joyce and Will Byers, and a fate they had never really escaped.

It should not have surprised Joyce, that the Upside Down was the other side of the coin to love - the very thing she had counted on, above all else, to save her son. She had been betrayed by that same desperate power of belief that had brought Will home only a few months previously; the belief that he was safe. No longer was it an asset enabling her to look beyond the ordinary, but a pair of blinkers, almost wilfully applied - which were ripped away more suddenly and

violently than she could have imagined. And when Will looked up at her, away from the fat worm wriggling in the sink, and the bathroom around them flickered and became a tangle of dark trunks, Joyce could only be grateful that, this time, she was there.

That her son would not be alone.

Hopper

Hopper knew almost the instant that Joyce disappeared. He couldn't have said exactly how; perhaps it was nothing more than a slight change in the quality of the air; somehow both colder and heavier, cloying and unbearable for just a moment, before it righted itself again. But it was enough. They'd crossed the barrier between worlds together; they were tied to each other on a cosmic level, though he could not say if it was the result of emotion or experience. Short of his daughter, there was no one in the world he had ever loved more than Joyce Byers, and his entire life had become a tuning fork, vibrating at exactly her pitch. With her gone, all that remained was a silence so still it threw him off balance.

By the time he arrived at the Byers residence, a heavy and foreboding weight beginning to settle on his shoulders, he knew he was too late - could sense his universe disintegrating into notes of discord.

He went in anyway.

There was nothing immediately wrong, to the eye of anyone who wasn't Jim Hopper. But Joyce's house, much like the woman herself, had seeped into his bones - its energy, and warmth, and life. Now, it was too quiet. Too still. It did not feel like the warm and loving family home that had been created against all odds, but like a house abandoned, un-lived in for years.

Joyce had been able to sense Will when he had disappeared - had managed to contact him, against all the laws of the known universe. She had understood, instinctively, that her son was alive. Hopper could not believe, standing in that cold shell of a house - a grotesque mockery of the place it had become under Joyce's careful eye - that she was anything other than... gone. How fitting it was, he thought, that in the fulfilment of his promise to find her son, Hop had

unwittingly lost Joyce. The horror of betraying a child, no older than his own would have been, weighed on him. He had thought – had consoled himself with the idea – that it had not been in vain. For a while, it had seemed as though it had meant something; a life for a life. Yet, with that single act, his one path to the Upside Down – to Joyce – had been severed. It was love that had been the source of his triumph; now it was that same act of love that was the source of his despair. There was no way to the other side, no more deals to make. He'd played his hand too soon, and ultimately, lost.

If there was one thing Jim Hopper was familiar with, it was loss; and if there was one thing he had learned, it was that sometimes, love was beautiful, and sometimes it was terrible, and sometimes... sometimes it just wasn't enough.

Mike

What Hop had not counted on, as he sank into the familiar comfort of despair, was Mike Wheeler; quiet, steady Mike, with a raw heart of his own, but who bore it better than Hopper ever could. Mike who was still young enough to have faith in the fairness of the world, who was quiet and steady and gentle, and as brave and noble as Joyce herself. Mike who never, ever, gave up on his friends, no matter who they were.

When he appeared at Hop's door, jaw set and determined, followed by an ill-disguised and reluctant Eleven, Hopper felt the weight on his shoulders lift slightly, as though someone had cut the tethers. *She was alive. He had a chance.* Mike, with his clear eyes and bright soul, possessed innately what Hopper had only ever been able to draw on from Joyce: the power of hope. And with it, he had done the impossible.

Tentatively at first, and then as desperately as a drowning man, Hopper began to cling to hope too. He would believe anything for Joyce.